

The Conversion of the Jailer.

A

S E R M O N,

ON



ACTS xvi. 30, 31.

Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.

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No. I.

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Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.

THE question, I have read to you, was asked by the Jailer at Philippi, and the answer was given by Paul and Silas. The case was this. Paul and Silas were taken up for preaching the gospel, and brought before the rulers. The rulers unjustly caused them to be severely whipped, and then “cast them into prison, charging the jailer to keep them safely: who, having received such a charge, thrust them into the inner prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks.”

But these good men were not unhappy. Their Master was with them, and filled their hearts with joy; so that, even at midnight, they could not refrain from singing praises to God; and their fellow prisoners, in other dungeons, heard them with surprise.

Just then, that God might shew his regard to them, and his anger against their persecutors, there was, all on a sudden, a very great and awful earthquake, so that the foundation of the prison was shaken by it. At the same time, all the doors flew open; and all the bonds and fetters, that were on them, and the rest of the prisoners, dropped off at once.

The keeper of the jail, starting up from his sleep, and finding the prisoners at liberty, was so terrified, lest he should be charged with a breach of trust, in letting them escape, that he drew his sword, and was going to stab himself.

But

But Paul, knowing his wicked design, and moved with pity for him, though he had used them so ill, cried out aloud, " Do thyself no harm, for we are all here." The Jailet calling for a light, ran with all speed into the inner prison ; and being full of horror, at such an appearance of God in favour of his servants ; and, at the same time, struck by the Holy Spirit with a deep conviction of his own guilt and danger ; he threw himself on the ground before them, and asked their direction for the relief of his soul, in the words of our text ; " Sirs, what must I do to be saved ?" A more important question was never asked. It becomes every one to make the same inquiry ; and if any of you have never before seriously made it, God grant you may do so now ! The answer given, and the only proper answer that could be given, was, " Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." May the Lord assist us while we consider these two parts of the text !

I. *An important question.*

II. *A gospel answer.*

I. *The question.* It is in few words, but they are full of meaning. Let us examine it. And I shall consider it, first,

As the *language of Conviction.* By conviction, I mean that work of the Holy Spirit on the mind of a sinner, whereby he is convinced that he is a sinner, and is properly affected with it. Without this, people try to excuse or lessen their sins. Some lay the blame of their sin upon others, as Adam did upon Eve, and as Eve did upon the serpent. People in general, think very little, and very lightly of their sin. Some even make a mock of sin, and glory in it. This is a sad state to be in. Such persons are very far

far from God, and have no religion at all, whatever they may pretend to have.

But it is a good thing to be sensible of our sin. It is the first work of God upon the soul to make it so. For this purpose we must consider the holy law of God, contained in the ten commandments. "By the law is the knowledge of sin." Thus St. Paul himself came to see he was a sinner, as he tells us, Rom. vii. 9. If ever we have broken the law, even once in our lives, we are sinners; for, as it is written, Gal. iii. 10. "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things, written in the book of the law, to do them." Now, *who* is there that can pretend to say, he never sinned in all his life? Do you not often, at public prayers, say, you are miserable sinners? But it is one thing to say so, merely in a customary way; and another, to be seriously convinced of it, and deeply affected with it.

The Holy Spirit not only brings us to admit, what we can hardly deny, that we have sinned; but he also shews us, that we have sinned much, and often. That we have sinned in our hearts thousands of times, when we have not seemed to others to sin.

He also shews us the very great *evil* there is in sin. He shews us what abominable *ingratitude* there is in it: for "God has nourished us, and brought us up as children, and we have rebelled against him." He shews what a *base* and *filthy* thing sin is; that it makes us hateful and abominable in his sight; viler than the brutes that perish. And he also shews us the *danger* there is in sin. "The wages of sin is death." Sin brought all our miseries into the world. 'Tis owing to sin that we must all die and return to the dust; and what is worse, sin exposes to the wrath of God, and the

the flames of hell for ever. Now the Jailer saw all this, and therefore cried out, " What must I do to be saved?" And this leads me next to observe, that,

This question bespeaks Fear. Yes, my brethren, it is the language of fear; it is the language of terror and consternation. Whenever we are alarmed at the approach of some dreadful evil, it is natural to cry, What shall I do? And have not sinners much to fear? Is it not " a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God?" O consider, who he is, that we have provoked by our sins. It is the great, the almighty God, who made the world with a word, and can crush it in a moment. It is " the Lord, who hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. The mountains quake at him, and the hills melt, and the earth is burned at his presence. Who can stand before his indignation? and who can abide in the fierceness of his anger?" Nahum i. 3—6. This is that dreadful God, who has said " that the wicked shall be turned into hell, with all who forget him." Shall we not fear him then? shall we not tremble at his presence? " Yea, saith our Lord, I say unto you, fear him, who can not only kill the body, but cast both body and soul into hell." O, how would you shudder to see a fellow-creature burning at a stake; how would you wish that death would speedily end his pain! But how would you feel to see him burning a whole hour; a whole day; a whole week; and all the time filling the air with horrid shrieks, and crying in vain for ease or death? Horrid as this would be, it gives but a faint idea of hell; that dreadful place of torment, " where the worm dieth not, and where the fire is not quenched." It was the dread of this, that made the Jailer cry, What

must I do to be saved ? And it was well for him, that he foresaw the evil, and found a refuge from it. God grant we may all do the same. But there is more in the question.

It is also the language of *Desire* ; earnest, ardent desire. The natural man desires only carnal things. What shall I eat, what shall I drink, what shall I wear ? How may I be rich, and happy, and respected ? Or, as the Psalmist expresses it, “ Who will shew me any good ? ”—any worldly good, any temporal good. But “ that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” The awakened soul has new desires ; or rather, all his desires are brought into one, and that one is salvation. “ What shall I do to be *saved* ? —to be delivered from the wrath to come ; to have my sins pardoned ; to be restored to the divine favour ? This is now “ the one thing needful.” Without this, all things are of no value ; they are less than nothing, and vanity, compared with salvation. This earnest desire will soon be expressed in prayer. For the sinner knows, that salvation can come only from God : and, as it was remarked by Christ himself concerning Saul when converted, “ Behold, he prayeth ; ” so it will always be found, that the desire of the new-born soul will vent itself in prayer.

The question in our text is likewise the language of *Hope*. I do not mean a lively and believing hope, founded upon the gospel, but a feeble, wavering hope, arising from a general notion of the mercy of God. For there is in the minds of all mankind, some notion that God is merciful, and may possibly pardon : and though this is too often abused, and people encourage themselves by it to go on in sin, yet it is of great service to convinced sinners, and keeps them from

from despair, till the Spirit of God leads them by the gospel to know that there is indeed forgiveness with him, and that the blood of Jesus cleanseth from all sin. Therefore the poor Jailer, though a blind heathen, does not say, "there is no mercy for me. I am such a sinner I never can be saved;" but his question seems to say, as the repenting Ninevites said, on the preaching of Jonah, "Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger that we perish not?" Jonah iii. 9.

Once more, we may observe, that the Jailer's question includes *a confession of his Ignorance*. He wanted to be saved, but he knew not *how*: nor can any man know this aright till he is taught of God. It is the true character of natural men, as mentioned Rom. iii. 17. that "the way of peace they have not known." By the fall of man, in Adam, darkness has covered the earth, and gross darkness the people. And this is the state, not only of the poor heathen, who have not the bible, but of a great many called christians. How many are there, among *us*, who are entirely ignorant of the way in which poor sinners are saved by Jesus Christ! But to remove this fatal darkness, Christ has commanded his ministers to "preach the gospel to every creature." Paul and Silas were so employed, before they were cast into prison. It had been declared in the city concerning them—"These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation," ver. 17. As soon, therefore, as the Jailer was convinced of his need of salvation, and his ignorance, he earnestly desires to be taught by them. He no longer reviles and abuses these ministers of Christ, but applies to them for instruction. And thus it will be with all who are truly

truly serious. They will not mock at preachers of the gospel, but rather “ Stand in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths ; where is the good way, that they may walk therein, and find rest for their souls.” Jer. vi. 16. And now, say, my friends, whether you have ever felt in your minds this earnest desire to know the way of God more perfectly ? For this end, do you bow your knees to God in prayer ? Do you read your bible for this purpose ? And with this view do you go to hear the ministers of Christ ? Be assured this is the pursuit of all who are under divine influence.

This question is also the language of *Legality*. By legality, I mean, cleaving to the law ; or, “ going about to establish our own righteousness” by the deeds of the law, or our good works. When God made man at first, he made a covenant of works with him. If he obeyed the will of God perfectly, he was to live ; but if he failed in a single instance, he was to die. He did fail, and therefore could never attain life by his own righteousness. God was pleased to save him by grace, and not by works. In like manner, the scripture assures us, that by grace alone we are saved, through faith ; and not by any works of righteousness which we have done. But, till we are taught of God, we are all apt to think that we can save ourselves, wholly or partly, by our own doings. The poor Jailer was of this mind, and therefore asks, What must I *do* to be saved ? He thought it must be by *doing* something that he must obtain the pardon of his sins, and eternal life.

Finally, I consider this question as the language of *Submission*. Poor man ! his heart was alarmed, and humbled for sin. He saw nothing but eternal destruction

tion before him, and would give all the world to avoid it : and therefore he cries, What shall I do ? As if he had said—Shew me my duty, and let it be ever so hard and difficult, I am ready to do it. I would go through fire or water, so that my precious soul may but be saved. And is it so with *you* ? Are *you* willing to part with your sins ? Depend upon it *you* are not in the way to salvation till *you* are willing to part with all for Christ : and if *you* are, how gladly will *you* hear the true way to salvation, as declared by these inspired servants of our Lord. This is contained in the second part of our subject, or,

The gospel answer, given to the Jailer's question. This short and plain answer, is the only true one, that can be given to the important inquiry ; and it is of vast importance, that a convinced soul be led in the right way. I am afraid that some men, some ministers, would not have given this answer, *Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ*. I am afraid, that if a person under that sense of sin which I have described, were to go to an ungodly minister, and say, O Sir, What must I do to be saved ? he would give different advice. He would say, I hope you have done nothing very bad. You have not killed any body. You have not robbed any body. You are no worse than your neighbours. I would have you lay aside such gloomy notions. Go into company, and be amused. Continue to do your duty, and you need not fear. But be sure you don't go among the Methodists. They will drive you mad." But you may learn from the text, that it is no madness to be concerned for the salvation of our souls, nor to be earnest in learning how we must be saved. You may also learn *who* are the true ministers of Christ ; they are those who preach him, and

and direct you to flee to him for salvation. Now all these, with one accord, in all countries, and of all parties, will unite and say, " Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ."

And here you may observe, how false that notion is, which some people maintain of zealous ministers, namely, that " they preach nothing but damnation : whereas the substance of what we preach is *salvation*. If we say any thing of damnation, it is that you may avoid it, and flee to Christ, as the deliverer from it. There is no need for the vilest sinner to despair. St. Paul says to the Jailer, though he had been a very bad man, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved. The gospel is *good news*, my friends. It publishes a free, full, everlasting salvation, to the chief of sinners.

Observe, *Who it is*, that St. Paul recommends to the notice of this distressed man. It is the **LORD JESUS CHRIST**. It is the **LORD**. The maker of heaven and earth, (Col. i. 16.)—" the Lord of all," (Acts x. 36.) who came down from heaven. The " Son of God," who became " the son of man," that we, the children of men, might become the children of God. His name is called **JESUS**, which signifies a **Saviour**, and he was so called, because he came " to save us from our sins," Matt. i. 21. Yes, this is " indeed a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Jesus Christ came into the world, to save sinners." He is also called **CHRIST**, or, the **Messiah**, long promised, and long expected by the Jews ; and it signifies the **Anointed**, which implies, that he was every way qualified for the work of salvation, and appointed to it. This then, is the glorious person to whom a sinner is directed to look for salvation. Believe

lieve on the Lord Jesus Christ. He exhorts him to believe. What is it to believe on him? I answer, It is to believe all that God says in the gospel concerning him, so as to look to him alone for salvation. Faith is explained by *coming to Christ*; it is the application of the mind to him for relief. It is called *receiving Christ*; the soul accepts him as held forth in the gospel, in all his saving characters and offices. It is a *committing the soul* to him, knowing there is salvation in him and in no other, and humbly relying on his love and faithfulness to preserve it unto eternal salvation. But the nature of faith is more fully considered in another sermon.

Observe further, the comfortable assurance that is here given to the distressed Jailer. *Thou shalt be saved.* Salvation was what he longed for. He wanted to know the way of it. He is directed to Jesus as the Saviour, and to believe on him, as the way of being saved by him; and in so doing he is assured that salvation shall be his. Blessed be God for many precious promises to this purpose in his word. Hear what Jesus Christ himself saith, (John iii. 36.) "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life;" and in another place, (John vi. 40.) "This is the will of him that sent me, that every one that feeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life."

AND now, my friends, let me ask you, Are you concerned about your souls? Were you ever brought, like the Jailer, to ask, with seriousness, with earnestness of soul, What must I do to be saved? Are you not a sinner? Are you not a dying sinner? Must you not soon appear before your Judge? What, then, will

will you plead ? Are you ready for the solemn trial ? O consider these things ! Trifle no longer with your souls ! Eternity is at hand. Heaven, or hell, will soon be your portion. And can you be unconcerned ? Be assured, that serious consideration, and deep conviction, are absolutely necessary. There is no real religion without these. O then, look up to God for the teaching of his Spirit ; and may you be sincerely desirous of salvation !

If you are concerned about your soul, which way do you look for help ? If you would be saved, what course do you take ? Do you say, " I must repent and reform ? " It is true ; so you must. But do not think, that repentance, or reformation, is sufficient to save your soul. No, Jesus is the only Saviour. The apostles directed sinners to believe in him. That is your first business. Pray for faith. It is the gift of God ; and he will give it you, if you ask him. And if you truly believe, repentance and reformation will surely follow, together with all good works, by which a true faith is as certainly known, as a tree is discerned by its fruits.

Finally, let all true believers take the comfort of these words : " Thou shalt be saved." We have not only the word of fellow-creatures for it, but the word of the living God. " He is faithful that has promised." Let us comfort ourselves, then, with these words ; and say, as St. Paul did, in the prospect of death, " I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him." 6 JU 62